



Border as Sluice

Towards a Cultural Geography of the Shen Kong Borderlands

Jonathan BACH
Mary Ann O'DONNELL

When global attention alights on the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border, it tends to focus on the geopolitical significance of a boundary that has morphed from the Sino-British border, to the Cold War ‘Bamboo Curtain’, to the demarcation between ‘One Country, Two Systems’. Most recently, Shenzhen has been given a mediating role within the Greater Bay Area because the history of experimental restructuring in the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) has served as both model and means for China’s expansion in international logistics and trade. Thus, when seen from Beijing, the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border sharpens the edge of its national narrative, both separating and conjoining economic, regulatory, and eventually political systems, serving to both delimit and expand

them. In turn, regional governments and planning agencies tend to see the border technocratically, strategically integrating local economies into global chains of trade and consumption.

On the ground in Shenzhen, however, the border has visceral effects, anchoring identities and permeating everyday life via the daily minutiae of businesses that buy, sell, ship, receive, manufacture, and bank across the border, as well through the activities of second-home-owners, students, daytripping shoppers, families, and friends, who regularly cross the border in the course of the day. Yet unless you work at it, along it, across it, or have other reasons to go back and forth, the physical border is mostly an absent presence. And therein lies the rub: when we think of the border

It is estimated that, by 2019, more than 30,000 students crossed the border from Shenzhen to attend school in Hong Kong. PC: ejinsight.com.

in general, we imagine fenced enclosures, flood-lit checkpoints, and ritualised protocols that secure territory and national ambitions; the border as a wall. And, yes, this architecture is an important component of the Shenzhen–Hong Kong border complex. However, as urban infrastructure, the border is less a faultline for state boundaries than it is a regulated form of connection and differentiation that locals refer to as ‘Shen Kong’ (深港). This expression combines the first character from Shenzhen (深圳, literally ‘Deep Ditch’) with the second character in Hong Kong (香港, ‘Fragrant Harbour’) to produce ‘Deep Harbour’. Notably, both characters contain the three-drop water radical, calling attention to the region’s watery origins and historical importance as the gateway to Guangzhou from the South China Sea. This neologism suggests a more fluid and porous condition than appears from a distance: the border as sluice.

In this brief concluding essay, we conceptualise Shen Kong through the analytical lens of the border as sluice. As the forgoing articles have shown, in a riparian and coastal region like the one where Shenzhen lies—with its tributaries, islands, coves, bays, fisherfolk, aquaculture, and shifting sands—controlling the relationship between water and land is at the heart of ordering space. Conceptualising the border as sluice, we submit, allows us to account for the border’s polyvalence, ambiguity, and power, its historical resonance and ongoing relevance, in addition to the ways in which the border comes to be embodied, transformed, and imagined. Consider, for example, those children who reside in Shenzhen but attend Hong Kong schools. As early as October 2000, the Hong Kong Legislative Council confirmed that 2,835 Shenzhen students attended school in the Special Administrative Region’s North and Yuen Long districts (Education Bureau 2001). By 2019, the number had grown to more than 30,000 students, many of whom attended schools that specifically catered to Shenzhen residents. Since Shenzhen *hukou* (户口; ‘household registration’) holders became eligible for annual travel passes between the

two cities, Shenzhen residents were able, for various reasons, to opt for a Hong Kong education. Within the border complex itself, there are designated lanes for students, who are brought to and from the border in ‘nanny buses’. The image of lines of young children at the border, neatly dressed in school uniforms and wearing identity card pouches around their necks, speaks to the banality of border crossing; the border is not a (simple) barricade, but rather an architecture for the regulated distribution of designated people. Thus, when figured as sluice, the Shen Kong border suggests how forms of urban liminality and concomitant identities can only be situated with respect to historical geographies, changing technologies, economic desires, and imagined futures.

Knock, Knock ...

Shenzhen’s border architecture operates at the conjunction of sea, land, and nation, coordinating two different regimes. The first border regime functions within that of international maritime logistics. As of 2020, the Port of Shenzhen was ranked fourth in the world in terms of container throughput, behind Shanghai, Singapore, and Ningbo-Zhongshan, but still ahead of Guangzhou (fifth) and Hong Kong (eighth) (Lloyd’s List 2020). That said, the combined shipping volume of the three Pearl River Delta ports makes the region an undisputed leader in the sector, not only buttressing the importance of the Greater Bay Area at home and abroad, but also shaping its physical form. In Shekou, Chiwan, and Yantian, container terminals dominate the view from seaside parks, while container trucks from neighbouring Dongguan and Huizhou flow into the city. Although container trucks have been diverted from the downtown area since 2006, they still dominate roads and neighbourhoods in subdistricts like Henggang that have not yet fully deindustrialised, reminding us not only of Shen Kong’s manufacturing origins, but also of its breadth. Shenzhen ‘brought in the foreign

and connected the interior’ (外引内联), making any place within the SEZ a potential sluice; the city was designed to mediate between and isolate the fuzzy boundaries between ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’ and the rest of the world. The second border regime regulates everyday border crossings between Shenzhen and Hong Kong. The land border between the two cities is only 33 kilometres long, while the much longer water border extends through Shenzhen and Mirs bays, merging with the Pearl River in the east and the South China Sea in the west, and incorporating smaller islands and marine waters. This is one of the busiest borders in the world, with ten checkpoints in Shenzhen and one in Hong Kong that are integrated into the public transportation networks of both cities. People cross the border mostly in cars, buses, and trains. The now-standardised ferry routes are less used, despite the panoramic views and thinner crowds they offer.

The essays in this forum have tracked how the establishment of the border and concomitant spatial reordering transformed the ‘lonely’ watery edges of empire into sluices for people, goods, and capital. Two sixteenth-century events informed the structure and purpose of these architectures. First, the Portuguese established the colony of Macau, bringing Western Europe into circuits of trade that had connected the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean for millennia. Second, the Spanish discovered silver in Potosí, Bolivia. For three centuries, Potosí *reales* would be the currency of international trade, accumulating in Guangzhou before the British began pushing opium to divert the flow of silver to London. Thus, in the nineteenth century, the Royal Navy sought, cajoled, and coerced water access from the Qing—from the deep harbours of Hong Kong to lesser concessions upriver to Guangzhou, turning the shifting borders of Xin’an into not only a crucible for trade and war, but also a point of departure for a diaspora that spread through Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America. At the peak of British imperialism, as Denise Ho recounts in her contribution to this

forum, James Stewart Lockhart and friends set the Sino-British border at the high-tide mark of the banks of Shenzhen and Mirs bays, transforming piers and marketplaces into sites of cross-border exchange. Maritime access to Guangzhou made Hong Kong significant, strategic, and sustainable. Indeed, before the 1997 Handover, the Crown Colony’s 78.8-mile (123-kilometre) water border was one of the few to consistently appear on international maps, as if dotted lines could stabilise a border that had been neither completely demarcated nor fully enforced.

The specificity of this cultural geography makes salient the impossibility of isolating the cities from one another. This is not merely a philosophical question, but also one of physical survival. Hong Kong imports 80 per cent of its water from Guangdong and all of it comes via Shenzhen. The image of water being delivered from the East River to Hong Kong spigots illustrates how cross-border infrastructures become flesh. The sluice here is a prosthetic that makes the national body and its multitudes materially possible.

... Who’s There?

During the early Cold War, when China began to consolidate its maritime borders, the Sino-British border increasingly came to structure belonging and identity in the region. As Alice Du Liangliang explains, this process was not only administrative, but also entailed moving islanders to the mainland and settling boat-dwellers in harbours. To claim watery borders, it was necessary to ground islanders and boat-dwellers. This history offers critical insight into how the border increasingly came to anchor identities; on the ground, the border first became visible not as architecture, but as settlement. Indeed, Taomo Zhou’s essay on the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Engineering Corps draws attention to the way multiple borders intersected in the embodied labour of this unusual group, which had been transferred

from the Third Front to help build the city in between the ‘first’ and ‘second’ lines. Through their bodies, we see a palimpsest of the borders across the Maoist and Deng eras, between rural and urban, between mobilisation and demobilisation, and between classes as some thrive and others languish in the new market-oriented city. The borders in Zhou’s telling are often invisible—a theme that takes centre-stage in Na Fu’s exploration of the border myths that shape daily life. In common parlance, borders often appear as ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ to the degree they are permeable, but Fu suggests that a better metaphor would be thick or thin, with echoes of ‘thick description’, as in Clifford Geertz’s famous essay. Here, as with Geertz, the border appears as a web of meaning that is not reducible to its observed function. We have to look, as Fu, Dodom Kim, and Sun Xin do in their essays, at the cobbler setting up shop on the footbridge, the professional woman literally in pursuit of mobility through travel permits, or Xin’s dilemma over wearing a mask near the border.

Together, the essays in this forum suggest that Shen Kong facilitates not only the regulation of differences, but also the governance of (ongoing and unavoidable) differentiation. As Fu’s, Kim’s, and Sun’s essays show clearly, the infrastructures regulating border crossings are neither limited to border locations nor supervised only by state actors. We carry the border in our wallets and in our phones, we traverse it through virtual private networks (VPNs) and online transactions, and we inhabit its traces in the physical spaces we visit, even when, as with Sben Korsh’s example of the stock exchange, it serves mainly to remind us of how virtual things have become. In other words, within and against the proliferating border, our identities are formed through mutual acts of recognition and misrecognition. Suddenly, we find ourselves confronted by Victor Turner via both van Gennep and Althusser: we are at the threshold, but we can only cross over by identifying ourselves.

On Containing Multitudes

The Greater Bay Area comprises the 11 cities of the Pearl River Delta. The name in Chinese, 粤港澳大湾区 (*yuegang’ao dawanqu*), suggests a golden triangle, with Guangzhou at its apex and Hong Kong and Macau forming its baseline. It is an image that forces one to seriously consider what Shenzhen offers—what kinds of spatial and social mediation are needed to thrive in the post-Cold War era?

One approach to this question is to look at how the meaning of border-crossing shifted circa 1980. The special zone was, by design and by definition, a strategic deployment of liminality, for goods, money, and people. Identifiable neither as wholly ‘capitalist’ nor wholly ‘socialist’, the zone was itself a sluice through which the currents generated by Reform and Opening Up flowed into China from abroad, and through which export products left. Before 1979, crossing the border afforded the individual new status, including right-of-abode (in Hong Kong) or *hukou* (in Bao’an County). In contrast, since 1980, crossing the border might be seen as an inconvenient chore; one passes through quickly and efficiently. But here is the catch: crossing the border today does not entail a change in status. Instead, what was ‘foreign’ can remain excluded from local accounting. The transition from the Sino-British border before 1979 to the Shenzhen-Hong Kong border post 1980 thus signified a different kind of border—not one set up to protect already-existing territory from the outside, but one that created the new inside by allowing the outside to come in, on the condition that it remain liminal. The ability to accommodate multitudes that are in but not of the city, we suggest, is an effect of how the Shen Kong border operates as sluice at both the level of international logistics and the level of everyday life.

In Shenzhen's port areas, goods are stocked tariff-free in bonded warehouses awaiting transit to other locations. Exports travel from assembly line to ship via multinodal containers that can be transferred from dock to truck and back again. Money turns into bits and bytes and waits in accounts to be converted and transferred. Like goods and money, people, too, inhabit a special kind of liminal existence created by Shenzhen's borders. Except for the so-called Shenzhen second generation (深二代), who were born and raised in Shenzhen, most of the city's population remains either of the city or in the city, but seldom both. Indigenous Bao'an villagers were initially denied Shenzhen *hukou*, with their villages still under rural land law and not under municipal control appearing as blank spots on city maps awaiting development. They were thus 'of' the city but not always 'in' it. Their legendary shift from farmers to landlords led them to build tenement housing for the migrants who poured into the city to construct its buildings, cook its food, and work in its factories. This made villages home to a migrant population that was, conversely, 'in' the city but not 'of' it—the so-called floating population without *hukou* or often any authorisation to be there at all. Even today, it is estimated that more than half of Shenzhen's actual (in contrast to its legal) population lives in urban villages. In turn, these migrants often work for the privileged managerial class, who remain, in a different way, also 'in' but not 'of' the city; many have come to Shenzhen from other Chinese cities and, even on receiving Shenzhen *hukou*, still consider themselves native to elsewhere.

We have called the border a sluice, in part because it works like an obligatory passage point, forcing populations through its narrow openings, whether receiving state blessings for their exits and thus compliant, marked, and counted, or evading controls, smuggling, or crossing without permission. The hallmark of a sluice, a word derived via Old French from the Latin word *excludere* ('to exclude'), is that it never stops everything. In gold mining, the sluice separates gold from gravel, but it soaks

everything that tumbles through it as well. It channels the water, too, but water, as we know, finds its own way. Water also wears down structures. In her introduction, Ho points out how the border since its inception has been prophesising its own demise, since Hong Kong was, one way or the other, 'always due to return to Chinese territory'. Now that it has, during the phase of One Country, Two Systems, the border has been adapted seamlessly to the governance of differentiation. In terms of logistics, the water border that was central to British hegemony has dissolved, allowing for the emergence of an integrated regional system. In terms of the individual, however, the border can disappear when needed (for those on high-speed trains, nanny buses, or airport shuttles), just as it can materialise when needed (whether to stop those with or, as the case may be, without masks). Indeed, if anything is truly in and of the city, it is the border itself. Without it, there would be no Shenzhen, but like Shenzhen, it cannot stay still either. ■

This text is taken from *Made in China Journal: Volume 5, Issue 3, 2020*,
edited by Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, published 2021 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.03.2020.20